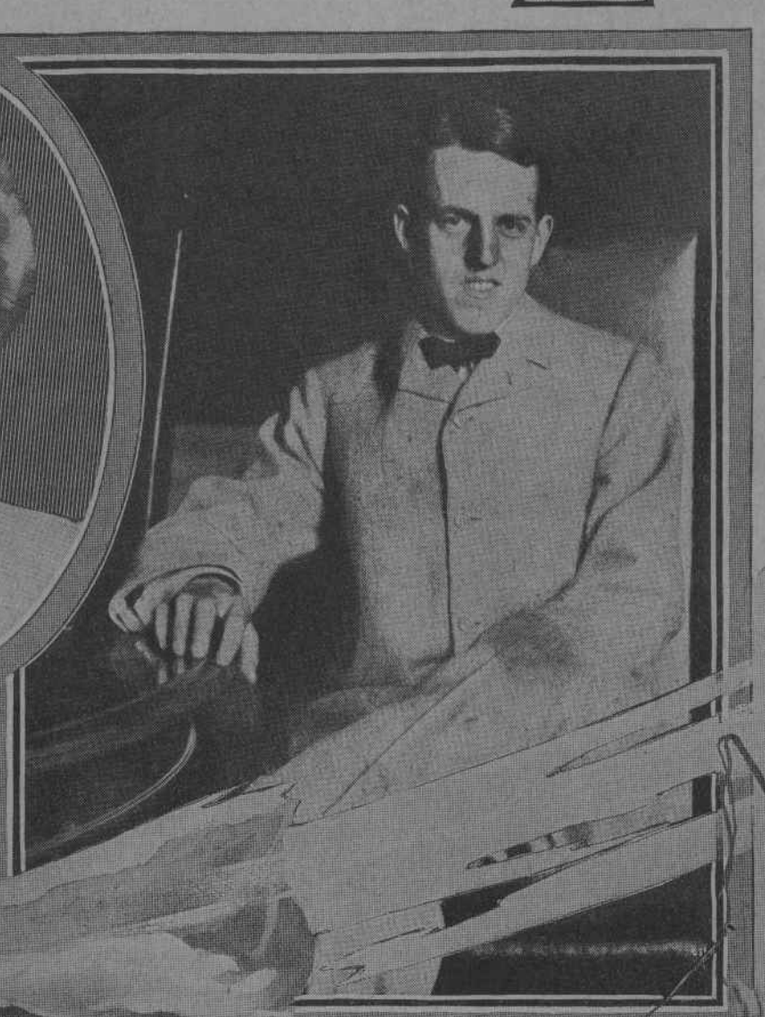
ICE, SNOW AND ZERO WIND

A Young Gothamite Couple's Freezing Winter Excursion in Newfoundland

MRS. JESSE S. COURTNEY



MR. JESSE S. COURTNEY

THE FIRST LUNCHEON

HOUSE WHERE WE LIVED ON PILLEY'S ISLAND

NOW that the mercury is at African heat one can appreciate the joy of a winter in Newfoundland. And the overheated of these sweltering times may the more enjoy the chill of the ensuing narrative when assured that it is a real experience of everyday people. On October 3 last Mr. Jesse S. Courtney, a John street business man, and his bride, who originally resided in West Sixty-fourth street, sailed northward from Philadelphia on the tramp steamer Hilt, with four passengers and a Norwegian captain.

A week later winter was upon them. Deck parties were snowballing each other and looking at icebergs. Guessing their weight and hearing them explode were among the sports of the voyage.

Mr. Courtney's destination was Pilley Island, in Notre Dame Bay, on the Labrador side of Newfoundland. His mission was to investigate certain pyrite mines there, and he expected to return in two or three weeks. But zero weather came early and navigation closed before November 15. He was obliged to spend the winter there, and has come home bristling with interesting stories of that particular corner of the world.

To begin with, Newfoundland has the same population as Newark, N. J. If that city were expanded to 42,000 square miles and towed opposite the mouth of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, then turned into a howling wilderness and covered with mountains, lakes and forests, it would be like Newfoundland, famous for mines, icebergs and codfish. It is probably the only country in the world where you can put down wells and pump up cod liver oil instead of petroleum.

Mr. Courtney found it an extraordinary land of ice and fish. By the middle of October the scenery was frozen solid and clergymen were doing parish work on snow shoes. With vast forests on every side, lazy men, rather than build warm log houses, with big fireplaces and pine knots for fuel, were content to freeze with little rattletrap sheet-iron stoves in their gaping board cabins.

Mr. Courtney and wife had the only decent house on the island, and that was a wretched affair. But it was the wonder of miners because it had a brick chimney, with no stovepipe above the roof. The wind blew so hard through the cracks as to rip up the carpet as fast as it could be nailed to the floor.

One day a blizzard not only blew it up, but rolled the carpet up in bales and banged them into the corner. It was the only carpet in hundreds of miles and a great curiosity. As little or no work is done during the long semi-Arctic winters, enough provisions have to be stored in summer to last from November to the middle of June.

One of the features of the front yards of the settlement was the ocean breaking the ice into blocks the size of Pullman cars, which in turn were hurled on shore with the noise of a bombardment.

When New York was bathed in the hazy blue of Indian summer the snow was level with the house tops along Notre Dame Bay. The dogs and goats took advantage of it, mounted the roofs and every night curled themselves to sleep around the stove pipes sticking through the shingles of the miners' cabins. In fact, Mrs. Courtney saw these animals after the blizzard holding their paws and hoofs over the hot pipes, thawing out their feet after a wild night of zero storm.

Sardines for Dogs

The chief food all the year round for natives and dogs is dried sardines. These fish in schools are scooped in by the millions, and, with the cod fish brought from the banks, salted and smoked. As fish is the only food of chickens, pigs and goats (which furnish milk), both flesh and milk are so salty and odorous that visitors can hardly stomach a meal on their first arrival. There is neither whiskey nor coffee—tea is the only drink.

"How we longed for the Waldorf," said Mrs. Courtney, "after one of those horribly over salted, smoked meals—everything absolute brine. Our only bread was ship hardtack, mashed and soaked into a compound called 'bruise,' so named because it's made of bruised ship's bread. It is eaten with or without fish. The best cod sells at one and a half cents a pound, salmon at five cents, or a twenty pound fish for ten cents. But these delicacies are for rich people. The populace at large lives on smoked smelts or sardines.

"There are only two horses on the island. Dogs and oxen are the beasts of burden. All night long, particularly at meal time, the dogs howl in hunger. We were 120 miles from the nearest railroad station. The mail was supposed to come once a week, and it did until winter set in. While the ice in the bay was only three or four feet thick, the big ice boats broke it by sheer weight."

After the middle of November dogs carried the mails, but later the weather became so intense and the snow so deep that all communication with the world was closed for weeks and months.

One mail carrier, George Gillard, while awaiting the snowed up train, lost nearly all his dogs. As they starved and froze he fed them to the survivors. His own feet were frozen and he barely escaped alive.

There is sickness, of course, at times, but it is almost impossible to get a doctor unless he happens to be in the neighborhood. There is but one physician for six hundred inhabitants. The other doctor is ninety miles away. When not patching up the frozen limbs of patients he is travelling on snow shoes trying to keep his own from freezing.

No intoxicating liquors are sold on Pilley's Island. The nearest saloon is 350 miles away, at St. Johns. The one resident Methodist clergyman has a district forty miles wide and he preaches in a place but once in six weeks.

The Episcopal parish is forty by eighty miles in extent. The rector has walked eighty miles on snow shoes to marry a couple. The Salvation Army is there in force, with a staff of eleven officers, and the sinners are scattered about the country for a distance of 350 miles.

As a rule, the natives are very illiterate; few can read, much less write. The weather was so cold that school had to be closed for weeks at a time. Every pupil must bring a load of wood to school each morning. People are indolent by nature, and instances are related where a man with a big house began using his dwelling for fuel until only one room was left.

How He Kept Warm.

When he wanted fresh wood he took his axe and chopped off a chunk of the house. Finally the family were packed into the one little room so closely that they kept alive by the heat of their bodies until winter broke.

Such was the condition of affairs when the almanac announced the arrival of spring, and on March 6 Mr. Courtney and his wife prepared to leave by dog train for the nearest railroad station. The snow was still twenty feet deep, and the salt water ice a solid floor where the surf ought to roll twenty feet high. Icebergs came thundering in, breaking the ice with terrific crash against the land.

Indeed, it was related by one of the heaviest tea drinkers that during the blizzard icebergs came sailing up the principal street of a certain northern settlement.

A retired sea captain heard a noise in the night and thought the goats were butting the door to get in from the storm. Next morning he found that icebergs had scooped out a part of the town, landed a stone quarry in one yard and a thousand tons of frozen fish in another, while half a mile distant a sawmill had been shoved into the cemetery—in fact, the whole town changed amazingly.

Mr. Courtney said he saw no such icebergs come ashore, for icebergs a mile high would be nine miles deep, but he did see rows of them in places dotting the coast like lighthouses.

A dog express train of thirty of the best animals was made up, with three guides for pilots. A special sled, extra long, was built for Mrs. Courtney to sleep on at full length. Enough dried fish, with provisions for all, was carried to give the dogs one meal a day during the trip.

By Dog Express.

The party, mounted on snow shoes, with Mrs. Courtney in the sled, left Pilley's Island on Friday morning at nine o'clock. Snow soon fell, and nine inches was the record that day. The first camp, nine miles distant, was made in three hours, but it was nightfall when they reached the next camp, with disaster at hand. Some one had stolen the stove. There was no wood and no axe to chop any with, so they had to push on through the night and storm eighteen miles further.

It should be explained that these camps have been established by the government for mail carriers, and are supposed to be provided with stoves, fuel and protection against the intense cold. The stealing of the stove was considered a dastardly act, justifying summary lynching, but the thief did not remain for the lynching.

It was one o'clock in the morning when, near exhaustion, the poor dogs, whining and choking, reached the third camp. Here they were fed their first meal since morning—salt sardines at that. In their agonizing thirst and hunger they ate snow until their mouths bled. Their weary feet also bled, and the guides, who had been travelling on snow-shoes all day and half the night, were as tired as any of the rest—all "dead beat" and glad of smoked fish and then, far away dreams.

Mr. Courtney's party were better provided. Before starting he had arranged for supplies to be forwarded from the south. He received a lot of frozen turkey, some genuine coffee, with other delicacies. After a hearty meal they threw themselves on piles of moss and pine boughs and fell asleep, the guides taking turns sitting up to replenish fires, and all were huddled together in the small log cabin.

Too Cold for Wolves

The extraordinary statement is made that no wolves were in the forest to howl, the intensely cold weather having driven them south. Early next morning the travellers were awakened by the dogs crying for something to eat, and when they began breakfast the animals whined so piteously that, despite protest from the guides, Mrs. Courtney threw them a little food. Result, dogs so demoralized for a time that they refused to move. Then she understood why they are fed but once a day. The animals finished breakfast by eating snow and the cavalcade started off, leaving bloody tracks of the dogs on the wintry trail. It was explained that dogs are fed only at night and only once in twenty-four hours, otherwise they would get torpid and not make time or speed.

During the first day out, the trail had been over a chain of lakes frozen twenty or thirty feet deep, they being of fresh water, with grand mountains rising white and menacing all around. On the following day the trail ran through forests, the "blazed" trees showing the route to be followed. There were no more "camps" and luncheon was eaten under the shelter of forest trees.

At last, as dusk was settling down, they came in sight of a house. It was the residence of the railroad agent's family. Mr. Courtney and wife were given quarters in the house, the only one there, where they were to await a special train coming with provisions to rescue not only them, but the captains of a fishing fleet recently smashed by the ice during the blizzard, and who had been snowed up for thirty-five days in the interior. As the chief government bakery of the island was near them, they fortunately had plenty to eat while waiting for relief.

Newfoundland Railroading

The house where Mr. Courtney was quartered had only two rooms—a sitting room and kitchen, opening into a little stable sheltering the private cow of the railway agent. Mrs. Courtney learned that she was the second woman who had come that way within six months.

In two days the special train arrived from the coast. It had a big rotary snow plough, a dining room car, a sleeper and plenty of provisions.

Taking on board Mr. Courtney and wife, the conductor pushed on to the train that had been snowbound for five weeks. The passengers were crazy with joy, hugged each other like women. Then everybody was invited to dinner. Into the Pullman dining car they crowded, the happiest lot of pilgrims on earth. They could hardly believe their eyes when they saw fat, juicy steaks with eggs, real coffee, hot and steaming, and with the only milk that they had had in six months that did not taste of smoked fish and salt herring.

It was still 317 miles to St. John. The way was tortuous and the track rough, but after thirty hours of "bucking" snow drifts they reached the end of their journey. It was the first train in six months that had crossed the island, and the whole town turned out to welcome them. Everybody was invited to the ice palace, where a festival was in progress, and given an ovation.

Home and Fair Weather

After feasting and sightseeing for three days, they saw the queer little steamer Glencoe come to carry them home. It was the first boat to break through the ice for weeks. With happy leave takings they set sail for southern waters. During the first night there were many icebergs. The sea was boisterous, and the rescued captains, after their sad experiences, were still fearful of danger and remained on deck all night watching the movement of the stupendous ice masses, looming up and receding like phantom mountain peaks, until at last the ship entered clear seas. Then the captain put on steam, and winter and storm were left behind.

Adventures of a Linen "Duster" and a Dress Suit in the Old World.

"I WAS doing the Continent with a friend of mine a few years ago," remarked a Chicago man who had been interviewing the steward of the smoking room of the St. Louis sufficiently to become somewhat garrulous, "and I never had so much fun in my life.

"Some society 'sucker' had informed my friend that a dress suit was indispensable to a man over the water, and he had laid in one of the best confections of the New York tailor. He had become imbued with the idea that no gentleman could sit down to dinner in a foreign hotel or go into a place of public amusement on the Continent without being incrusted in a clawhammer.

"It was our first trip abroad, but I had observed the injunctions of an experienced friend and carried no more baggage than I would require in a two weeks' journey in the States—the single business suit I had on and the limited changes of linen that suggest the laundry twice a week.

"My young friend was from Indiana and wore over his travelling suit the conventional long tailed linen duster of the Hoosier excursionist. In a big valise that weighed a ton he had provided against every conceivable exigency that might happen to a man in an uncivilized country; in a bulky rectangular package reposed an extra suit of clothes and that dress suit as it came from the hands of the Gotham fabricator, and he was thus equally prepared for the most effete social conditions of modern Europe. The latter was done up in stout brown paper and reinforced by the ordinary shawl straps.

"I was to join him on a certain day at a certain railway station in Paris for the trip through Italy, both of us having 'done' London and Paris separately. We met punctually at the hour, the same as if the appointment had been made only over night, instead of a couple of months previously in Chicago.

"Well, sir, the sensation my friend made in that crowded Paris station could never have been equalled by the wild man of Borneo. He was a tall man and that linen duster swooped down to within six inches of the pavement. I'm dead certain that a man in his night shirt, which that garment strongly suggested, would not have attracted more attention. People stared at us, the women almost bursting with suppressed merriment, the men apparently staggered out of their customary nonchalance. I wouldn't have noticed such an apparition, perhaps, in a Chicago station, but here it fairly knocked the breath out of me. Then, in my pleasure at meeting my friend, who was a cracking good fellow, I immediately forgot all about it.

"When we struck the Italian frontier and the custom house officials went through us I learned about the dress suit for the first time. My little bag was chalked without much examination, but the officials compelled my friend to open his bundle and shake out his dress suit for their admiration. I saw that it had never been worn. They also made him pull out his fine linen—not so much, apparently, with the suspicion that he was a smuggler as to afford them excuse for contemplating the construction of the linen duster and speculating on its probable origin. They caused him to unbutton it under the pretext that its ample folds might conceal dutiable goods, but, really, I believed, to see if he had his clothes on beneath it.

"That duster and the dress suit from that time on furnished me with constant entertainment. When we entered a hotel the waiters fell back aghast before us. My friend climbed the leaning tower at Pisa and when he waved his arms to me, where I leaned against an old church below, the people gathered about curiously—they thought it a Moslem priest beckoning the imaginary faithful to prayer. The unbidden tears in my eyes strengthened this supposition. As for the dress suit, it was pulled out at every frontier and admired.

"In Switzerland we got a sudden wetting down several times, my single umbrella being insufficient to protect more than our heads and shoulders. The tail of the duster became bedraggled, like the tail of a wet chicken, while the brown paper on the dress suit became reduced to pulp and went to pieces under the very next custom house officer. Meanwhile, my friend seemed to enjoy the humor of the situation and we had many a hearty laugh together. In fact, one day in a mountain shower, of which we received more than our proportion, owing to the dress suit and duster, the tail of which then more closely resembled a dishcloth, getting tangled up with a fat, jolly looking Swiss lady, as we squeezed up the spiral stairway leading to the imperial of a mountain tram car, we laughed so enthusiastically that the whole crowd caught the infection and, without knowing what we were laughing at, fairly screamed. For myself, I really wept from excess of mirth!

"Well, sir, you should have seen that—Highball, steward; and say! don't make it—there!"